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A GLANCE AT THE EARLY AGES
OF THE CHURCH.

A LECTURE,

DELIVERED IN ST. ANDREW'S CHURCH, ST.
ANDREW'S, ANTIGONISH,

BY THE REV. DR. CHISHOLM,

AUGUST 24, 1874.

HALIFAX, N. S.:

PRINTED BY COMPTON & CO., BEDFORD ROW,
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PRO JESU CHRISTO.

ON taking a view of the present religious state of the world whose chief glory and happiness once was to be Christian, we behold heresies becoming effete, and schisms lifeless. The violence which formerly characterized their attacks upon the Holy Catholic Church, has lost its intensity, and the hatred exhibiting the bitterness of disinherited children, has grown less venomous. Protestantism, in its thousand and one various fragments, is losing on every side its hold upon the minds of those who are said to be within its loosely connected domains. It bore in its birth the seeds of its dissolution, and carried with it a suicidal hand, ever wounding and tending to annihilate itself; and in a quarter of a century hence, we may reasonably venture to say, it will be a fact of the past, except where ignorance sustained by obstinacy may retain for it adherers. Its followers at that time shall either have returned to the One True Fold, or shall have fallen into the ranks of infidelity and irreligion, of which it was the prolific mother. The schisms of the East, shrouded in their yet living pride, lie prostrate on the lands which gave them birth, or hover droopingly, as a bird of great age, over them. By reason of the agony of the former, and of the lethargy of the latter, the days of Scriptural Controversy are over—are over, until the Church's yet greatest victory will be sung.

Broken, however, and still breaking up though Protestantism is, and though torpor has seized the Schisms of the East; though all these once apparently formidable foes have ceased to a great extent to harass the Holy Roman Catholic Church, the Church still is not left in peace. No; She is engaged in a contest by far more terrible than any which is read of in the history of Her contests and victories. She on the one side, infidelity and irreligion on the other. She fights as She did when the Catacombs were Her home, without the aid of the earthly great: for Her adversary stand

kings, governments and the world. She fights openly; and dwelling, as She is, on mountain tops, where She is, and what She is, and what She is doing, are patent to all. Infidelity is strenuously spread—leaving aside the divers other means at its use—is spread by a vast hidden and artful conspiracy—by the society of Free Masons. This pest of pests branches out over the civilized world; it especially extends over cities and villages; it is at work in governments and in the secret cabinet of kings; and it insidiously poisons where it does not freely sway. It is composed of various ascending—correctly speaking—descending grades, linked all closely together; its aim the most iniquitous and impious of objects. The lower grades put on the semblance, the mask of virtue, and boast boldly and loudly of their charity; but this only to decoy their unwary adepts from their duty, and to lead them finally to higher grades—to the ranks wherein Christ's most bitter opponents are found. And thus, alas! the Church has to mourn the loss of many of her spiritually ruined children. This society, together with its ally—the school of self-styled Scientists—forms the most dangerous phalanx which the Church has yet encountered. The Neroes and the Diocletians, and the proud heresiarchs of after-times, were not such injurious enemies as these. And bear well in mind, our Bismareks, and our Victor Emanuels, were not the persecutors they are, were they not spurred on by the latent power which abides in the base Masonic Society.

Again, the Church announces that Christ is God: Infidelity and Irreligion reject the supernatural, and laugh at the idea of a Redeemer from Heaven, and hold man as self-sufficient, as God. Infidels proclaim that the Founder of Christianity was a mere man, that its propagation and existence were to mere men due, and that by mere men it is held together to-day. Voltaire spoke thus, and added, that what was done by man, could by man be undone; and with foolhardiness girded himself on under this vain hope, to pull down the work of Christ. Bismarck, the Infidel's most obedient and powerful instrument of to-day, repeats Voltaire's

horrible blasphemy, and renews, not through writings, but through the cunningness of diplomacy and the terror of the arms at his command, Voltaire's presumptuous attack, deluding his mind with the thought that he will succeed, though others have heretofore failed. Since, as he declares, these have failed, because they were not skilled in the use of the proper means therefor, in which he confides himself to be.

Such is a brief sketch of the battle which the Church fights to-day. I have given a few rough outlines of it only. I descend not into particulars, into the many circumstances observed therein. I shall pass over the many minor tactics employed against the Church; these things all are outside my purpose, and needless for it. It is sufficient to say, that Hell has never before attacked Heaven so violently, and that Christ has never heretofore been assailed so fiercely, and never shall be hereafter. "Crucify Him!" "Crucify Him!" resounds not in Jerusalem only; the impious demand is made by a thousand voices in every so-called civilized land, and Calvaries are pointed to by ingrates near its every city. The air is filled as it never before was, with the most outrageous blasphemies; and it is Heaven's infinite patience and mercy only which can now restrain Heaven's wrath. Christ is an impostor, and the religion which he taught and left to mankind as their real food, an imposition; the world is too wise to-day to bear any longer with either; it shall soon rid itself of both. These are expressions which are uttered by, alas! too many in the once Christian world, and contain beneath sentiments which find home in their bosoms. But the same boastful cry, as is the above, was raised long ere now. "Christianos ad leones"—the "Christians to the lions"—was heard over the Roman Empire, and the Roman Cæsars thought, that mid the wholesale slaughter of Christians, they were about to root out of the world Christianity; but the Roman Cæsars fell, and the successors of the Fisherman of Galilee ruled in their stead.

It is precisely to these, the first centuries of the Christian era, I have been bringing you. No persecution of the Catho-

lic Church has since then raged in Europe so similar to the one of that period as the one which is now raised against Her. The real error of the day attacks *Christ Himself directly*, and the attack is backed by Princes. PAGANISM has come to life again; but a Paganism, one hundred fold more perverse and pernicious than the Paganism of the Roman Empire, and of the old sphere of Idolatry; for it is not the Paganism of ignorance, but one which has grown up in the face of the clear light, which has so brilliantly shone over Europe for the last many ages. But its history will be one of failure, as it was then. I would bring Bismarck with me, that he might see what became then of the attempts of mighty Emperors against Christ's spouse, that he might learn a salutary and reproofing lesson therefrom. I would bring our Infidels too, that they might behold how a humble band of Christians conquered the Conquerors of the world, because a stronger power than that of this earth was invisibly breathing into it invincible might, and to teach them thereby that Christianity is not the work of man, but of God. I would show the extreme pride of the day, that the humility and weakness of Christianity will be, as it always has been, victorious in every contest, and that it is naught but vanity to war against it. I have chosen the weak, Christ Jesus has said, to confound the strong. But why? That thereby it might be seen by all that the work for which they were chosen was not human but divine; for if the weak would confound the powerful of the world, it would be because they had more power *in themselves*; but not having, because weak, this power *from themselves*, they necessarily should have it otherwise—from God.

Now, then, we shall enter into the greatest fact recorded in history, either ancient or modern—into the first spread of Christianity. Great wars and conquests; vast undertakings, and the formation of powerful societies, pale away by the side of this; and their heroes and chief actors become, alongside the propagators of Christ's religion, insignificant. We shall be viewing the Omnipotence of Heaven, working in its

majesty, and its unlimited goodness, in its mercy and kindness. We shall first take a glance at the fact of the propagation of Christianity, and at some of its circumstances; and then we shall draw therefrom a few conclusions, which, while they shall force us, Christ's chosen children, to adore God in His works, we may hold up to Infidels, and to the Irreligious, as matter of serious and profitable thought.

When the population of the earth, a fraction of it—the Jews—excepted, was the slave of idols; when the temples of imaginary and false Gods existed numerously in every community, and when from their many altars smoked victims—in some places even human; when the whole world was lost in grossness, and the passions of man were allowed to follow their base objects unrestrainedly, there issued from Jerusalem a few men, low by birth, and in human sciences unskilled, sent by Heaven on a mission to the degraded peoples of the world, to cities great and small, to villages and to country places, to high and to low, and even to penetrate into the wilds, wherein roamed far and wide their fellow-men, fierce and savage. Earthly resources they bring with them none; they are poorer than when as simple fishermen, they cast their nets on the waters of the Tiberian Sea. A conceited and potent, though material world, lies before them. There are Greece and Egypt with their schools and scholars. There is Rome in the zenith of its greatness, bearing on its shoulders the administration of the Empire of the then known world. There is the rest of mankind with their various undisturbed passions. They come out humble, and in the eyes of man objects of contempt. They come out bearing in their hands a declaration of war, of mortal war, against the religion which entwined the glories and conquests of Rome, against the Gods of Greece, and those of Egypt, and against the Gods of every other land. They preach a strange and new God, a God seized without resistance, condemned without opposition, and executed as a malefactor. And with this strange and new doctrine they preach the doctrine of the mortification of the passions, and other doctrines mysterious, and to human reason incomprehensible. Whither-

soever they direct their steps, they announce the truths, which they had received from above. Soon, at once, amid the various and stupendous wonders which God works through them, thousands of every race and of every clime at their first address, pronounce themselves followers unto death of Jesus. They wind their way to Antioch, to Athens, to Alexandria, and to Imperial Rome; and numberless hearers convinced embrace the Gospel, which they bear. Thomas goes among the Parthians; Matthew visits Ethiopia; Bartholomew Hither India, Andrew Scythia, John Asia, Peter Pontus, Galathia, Bythilia, Cappadocia and the neighbouring provinces, and finally reaches Rome. Paul, from Jerusalem, travels on his Apostolic journey through Illyria, and thence to Rome, where with Peter he closes his life in martyrdom. Wherever they go Christ's name is pronounced and adored by countless souls. The light of the Gospel is soon diffused over the world, and its rays, like the rays of the rising unclouded sun, penetrate into every corner. Christ, the crucified Christ, is believed, is loved from East to West. Assemblies of Christians become numerous, where those of demons a few days before held undisputed rule, and heroic virtues are practised by multitudes.

The irresistible force of Christianity was attracting everything to itself, when the world, enraged that a new but powerful opponent was fast reducing its power, rose up in its might against it. It rose up backed by the strength of Rome and of its Cæsars, pressed on by the hatred of the Jews, and by the followers of idolatry in every land. It rose up bearing but material arms, and practising on Christians tortures of every description, and dealing out without resistance indiscriminate death among them. Christ's apostles soon disappear. Peter, their chief, is crucified with his head downward, that he may not die like his Master. Paul is beheaded, and the others, John excepted, encounter a violent death in other shapes. They are borne to their graves; but Christianity dies not. They leave successors preaching the same truths as came from their lips—Christ Jesus and eternal salvation.

They go out, as did their teachers, making converts to the Gospel. Nero dies, yet other persecutors arise. But notwithstanding that a Domitian and an Antoninus persecute and shed much Christian blood, Tertullian exclaims: "We are but of yesterday, and we fill your cities and your towns; we dwell in your palaces, and hold offices high and many." To these persecutors other persecutors succeed; but, though persecutors grow implacable, and persecutions mercilessly rage, and though Christians are massacred in every province, yet, singular fact, Christianity extends, and casts deep roots in Europe, Asia and Africa. The blood of martyrs produces new Christians, new martyrs.

Such is the history of the first ages of the Church down to Diocletian, Maximin, and Maxentius, a history of sufferings and blood. A detailed account of this period of martyrdom would fill volumes. Persecution followed persecution, now general, then partial. There was, indeed, at intervals, an apparent lull in this terrific storm; but the storm soon broke out in its fury again. Millions upon millions were put to death; old and young, men and women, nobles and slaves, learned and ignorant, sickly and weak, healthy and robust, without fear and unflinchingly met death, proclaiming joyfully in the face of prefects and emperors that Christ Jesus was God. They underwent unheard of species of torture, and judges and executioners taxed to their utmost their minds as to how they would render their sufferings more painful, and their death more terrible. One would suppose, when reading an account of these things, that he was reading of scenes among savages and Cannibals, not of the doings of the citizens of proud Rome. But when each persecution subsided, and instruments of torture were for the moment laid aside, there stood the Church, youthful, fresh and powerful, as if the blood She had shed gave Her new strength and vigor, and the storm of persecution was to Her only a refreshing breeze.

The Evil One sees this; he sees that his attempts to destroy the Church for the previous 250 years, terrible though they

were, were all made in vain, and he prepares a final and irresistible attack upon Her. Diocletian, Maximin and Maxentius, in his name, exert all the might that is in the Roman arm, and the most merciless, unsparing and general persecution now rages. The vast Roman Empire becomes a slaughter-house of Christians. Their blood flows in torrents in all its cities and towns; they are sought for as wild beasts, and when we read in history of the barbarous cruelties practised upon them, we shudder through horror. I shall not say more upon this period of woes and threatening ruin.

But, after all the Vicars of Christ, from Peter to this time, were martyred, and three centuries had gone by, during the greater part of which the expression of a belief in Christ entailed death; after Christian blood had flown in rivers, and the relics of martyrs filled every land; and, when but a day before Diocletian proudly gazed upon what he thought the ruins of Christianity, what on a sudden do I behold? I behold a successor of Nero, a Roman Emperor, I behold Constantine humbly kneel before a successor of Peter, before Pope Sylvester, praying for admittance into the Fold of Christ. I see the Cross borne triumphantly over the eagles of the Roman standards. I see the temples of the Gods closed; I see idols broken in pieces near by the palace wherein Diocletian dwelled. Now churches rise up everywhere, and hymns are sung, and sacrifice offered to the true God in the sign of a friendly world. Decrees issue from each succeeding Emperor, Julian excepted, aimed now against vain Gods; till finally in the days of Theodosius idolatry ceases to exist in the Roman Empire—Pagan rites are abolished; the Pagan priesthood has vanished. The seven hills of Rome are crowned with Christian Churches, and where were published cruel edicts against Christianity, there Peter reigns all-powerful. Christianity receives into its bosom the Roman Empire, and speeds its way to convert and civilize the untamed hordes of the North.

This glance at the rise and propagation of the Christian Religion, brief and hurried though it was, opens to our minds

a great field of thought. In history we read of no change so extensive and astonishing. The Romans destroyed the kingdom of Carthage, conquered the Greeks, and subdued the world ; but after an almost uninterrupted war of three centuries, in which they had every apparent advantage, they had to succumb to the humble followers of the Cross, and to yield to them the Empire of the world. This is a singular fact ; yes, most singular indeed ; it is divine, the work of Heaven, not of earth. Would the result of the mission of the Apostles be such as we have seen ; would their successors have made so many converts while instruments of torture and death were preparing before them, and would they have succeeded in overcoming Pagan Rome and its gigantic power, were it not that they were aided by God extraordinary, that Heaven's special grace gained for them souls, sustained them in their desperate trials, and rendered them victorious ? Let us bring nearer our eyes the facts stated above. We shall begin with the Apostles. These holy men set out possessed visibly of nothing, but the scanty clothing on their bodies—to speak the truth, in a beggar's garb. They address men whose hearts' feelings are interwoven with the worship of Gods ; for thus did the customs of their various countries, and their laws and their religious ceremonies educate them. And of what Gods ? Of Gods whom they deemed benefactors and saviours ; of Gods cherished from days lost in the obscurity of the past by Greeks and barbarians in town and in the field, and honored with festive days, with plays, and with sacred rites, by all kings, peoples, philosophers and legislators. They address them, speaking in terms of contempt of their favorite deities, and in their stead present them, as an object of their adoration, a God crucified. Now, is it natural that at the bidding of such humble men, the proud Roman, whose soul was linked to his country's Gods, would turn at once his back upon these, and follow Him who was born in a stable, lived as an artisan, and died as a criminal ? We know too well how the long accepted usages of a country cling to a native's heart.

In excavations made in Rome some time ago, near the palace of the Cæsars, there was discovered what was supposed to be a gymnasium, or school for boys, and on one of its walls was scratched the figure of a crucified human body, bearing upon it the head of an ass, and beneath was the inscription, "Deus Christianorum," "the God of the Christians." In this childish fact you have an index of what naturally could not have been but the mind of the Roman world in respect to Jesus. Again, to men of that time how unwelcome would sound the words "do penance," and "take up your cross, and follow me." Such severe doctrine proposed to voluptuous Pagans, and be readily and sincerely accepted!

But in spite of the religion and habits of the world at the time the Apostles began to preach, many thousands, as soon as they heard of Christ, abandoned the religion of their fathers, and gave themselves up to a mortified life. And when Nero began his persecution, Christians filled the Empire. But the conversions in the succeeding ages are in a way more singular; since there were no living eyewitnesses to the life of Jesus; yet the whole Roman Empire was converted. Besides, take St. Justin, a convert himself; take Origen, take Tertullian, take with them others, all, the greatest scholars and philosophers of the first two centuries of the Church, and tell me, as was the case, that they believed more firmly that Christ was God than they believed in their own existence, and add that Christ's divinity was a fable, I declare you would be expressing a paradox, an absurdity.

To sum up, were the religion of Christ a fiction, the world's answer to its teachers would have been that they had entirely lost their reason, and it would treat them as madmen. Men accepted the religion of Christ, because God's grace filled their souls with a special light, that they might see its truth. Miracles, without doubt, were wrought unceasingly, and were instrumental to the conversion of many. Infidels, of course, say these miracles were only tricks of Christ and his followers. This

is nonsense; for the Gospel and its preaching bear most clearly on their face sincerity and simplicity, not trickery or deception. The miracles of Christ and his followers were undeniably such, were public and stupendous; but they pointed only to the truth of Christ, it was the grace of God which fixed it in mens' hearts.

The Christian religion not only showed itself divine, when, though most antagonistic to the human passions, and apparently absurd, it completely triumphed over the Gods of the Gentiles; but, moreover, it likewise showed itself thus, in having gained this the most signal of victories in the midst, and in spite of a series of fearful persecutions. What is meant by martyr? Of course, a witness. Now, through three centuries of bloodshed, many millions of martyrs were put to death over Asia, Europe and in Africa, testifying to the divinity of Jesus. Read the lives of the martyrs. Each one makes before his judges, his persecutors, and the world, a fearless declaration, and this declaration he signs with his life's blood: it is, I believe that Jesus Christ is God. Tortures may be multiplied, and these exquisite, and his pains may be increased beyond human endurance, still his lips repeat, I believe that Jesus Christ is God. I believe that Jesus Christ is God lingers on his dying breath. It is not the excitement of enthusiasm that gives him spirit. No; calm, nothing ruffles him: reasonable he confounds his judges by his answers, and convinces many of the bystanders of the truth, which he dies for. Again, the martyr's conviction was most remarkable. He would rather die, declaring that the sun, whose rays were falling upon him, was not in the Heavens, nor were his eyes dazzled by its light, before he would deny his Jesus. It was stronger than the conviction begot by the senses, more deeply rooted than that fixed by a long and universal tradition, or worked into the soul by reason. It was the conviction of Heavenly Faith, the conviction of every true Christian who has ever lived. Now, to come to the point, could it be that a myth, a fiction, a lie, and that the most outrageous lie ever uttered, suppos-

ing Christ to have been a mere man, could produce a conviction so deep, lively and ineradicable, as to send several millions, and among them profound philosophers and most erudite writers, to calmly face on account of it death, and a siege of barbarous tortures? No; tell me that these legions of tranquil invincible heroes were fools, and I will let human reason drift among the shoals which surround it, and be of service no more. There is only one solution of this general, lasting and firm resistance unto death on the part of the primitive Christians; it is, that Jesus crucified was really God, and that His divine virtue breathed conviction and strength into them.

Now, finally, another thought on the Roman persecutions, and I am done—a thought on the triumph of the Church in spite of them; and we shall see another proof of the omnipotent arm of God sustaining it. You are aware from what I have said of the earthly feebleness of the Church. She came out clad in humility and material weakness, and She attacked the world on its own ground. She attacked the cities of Idolaters with their riches; She attacked the mighty in their power; She attacked the majesty of the Roman Emperors and their armies, which held in subjection the world. She encountered fire, the sword, the rack, and divers instruments of torture. Now tell me, naturally, who should be the victor—the Church or the world? The world, humanly speaking, certainly. But the world was not. Riches were of no avail against Her; armies melted before Her; the power of the great weakened away in Her presence; persecutions added to Her strength, and the majesty of Roman Emperors in the end humbly kissed Her feet. Heaven, not earth, conquered.

Such are a few of the thoughts which come to our mind when we fix our attention upon the early ages of the Church. I might, if I were able, bring you into them more deeply, but so far must do just now. I have shown, as I have said I would, the infidel—the most unhappy being that treads the earth—that in these first ages he could find motive enough

to render him sleepless many a night. But he is difficult of conversion. God might thunder out truths from the clouds over his head, and he would call the prodigy a phenomenon. He has made a God of his reason ; every thing must suit it ; and what should be a preamble to Faith does not allow room to Faith at all. But the prayers of the many just now in in the world may yet bring him back to his former home, or to that of his fathers—to the Catholic Church.

Bismarck, too, I remarked, would learn from the same a salutary lesson. But Bismarck boasts that he can persecute and destroy, though former persecutors failed in the latter ; because, he says, he knows the way. Probably Diocletian was certain his way, too, would be successful. But be this as it may, allow Bismarck more power and diabolical skill than the persecutors who preceded him ; it is only a work of weak earth against Heaven ; it is frail mortal man, who aims his blows against the all-powerful arm of God. Nero's lot, and that of every other Roman persecutor, shall be his.

The infidel may set his snares to catch the foolish. Bismarck may lead out heroic confessors from prison to death, we fear not for that majestic body—the Catholic Church—as it stands over every land, girded powerfully in the unity of faith and love. She may, indeed, be shorn of earthly goods, as She was in the beginning ; but as in the beginning, She carries within Her that hidden heavenly might which shook in their day the throne of Emperors, and which will eventually humble the proud kings of to-day, though the day of victory may not be very nigh.